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LOS ANGELES

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BY MICHAEL GOUGIS

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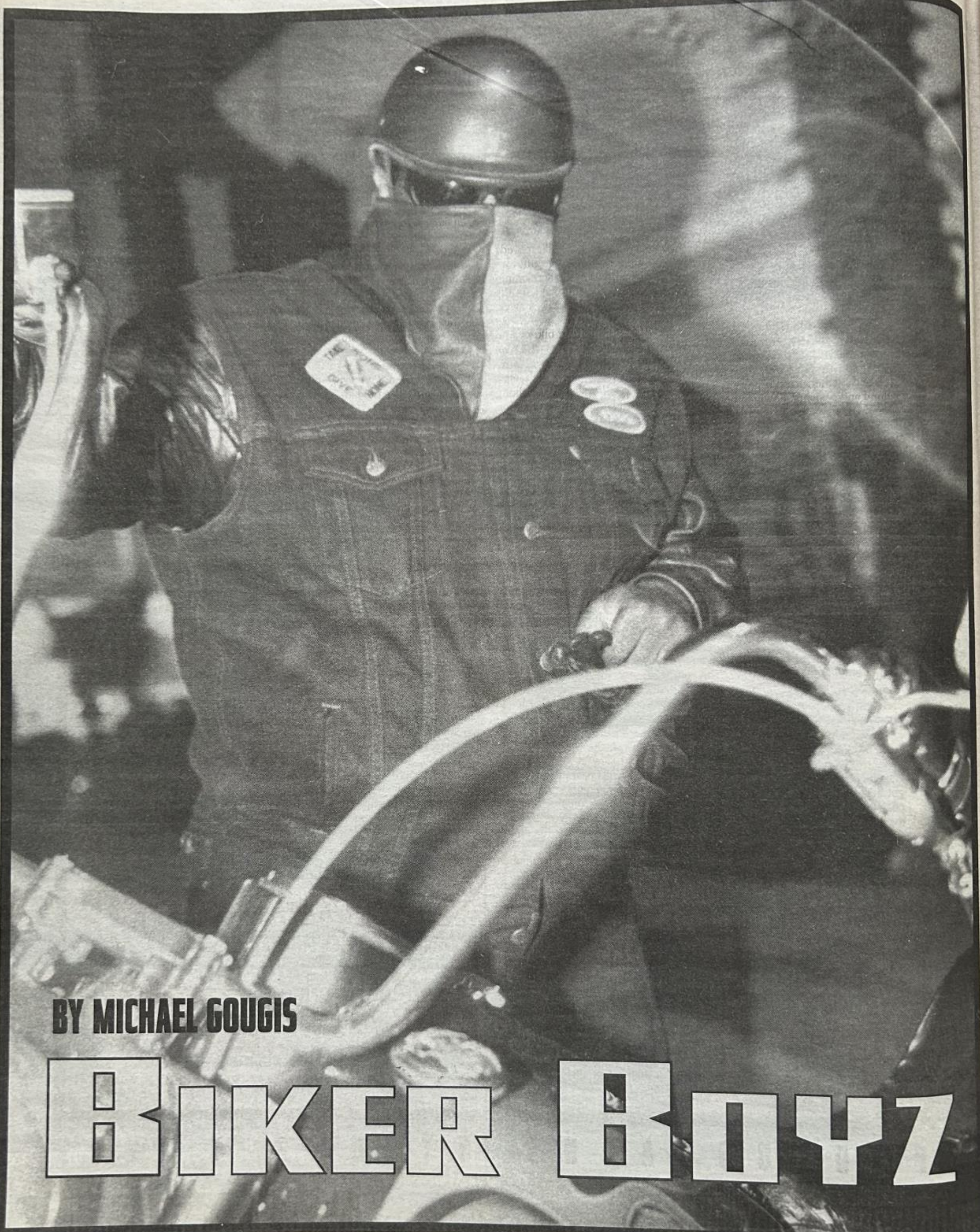


BIKER BOYZ

BY MICHAEL GOUGIS

THEY AREN'T YOUR FATHER'S MOTORCYCLE OUTLAWS.

It's Saturday night on the black side of Fresno, just before midnight, when some clown on a Japanese drag-racing bike gets it all wrong at the worst possible moment. He's doing a loud burnout in the middle of the jammed street, blue smoke pouring from his motorcycle's spinning rear tire as he squeezes tightly on the brake lever. Then, in front of hundreds of people, the bike suddenly jumps sideways, throws him off, and smashes to the pavement, the throttle stuck wide open, engine screaming, blue flame shooting out the tailpipe. The guy limps over and picks up the bike. Amid much laughter and pointing, he rolls the now-silent wreck away, humiliated.

Inside a rented building a few yards away, African-American bikers who came from Seattle to San Diego have gathered — and as they say, it's *on* tonight. Parked cars and motorcycles line the narrow street, crowd the parking lot, and spill over onto nearby streets, sidewalks, and front lawns. Men and women from inner-city biker clubs across the state are walking around and cruising slowly in both directions past the building's front door, jamming the road like Hollywood Boulevard on a Saturday night. Two guys roll past in a van with a big-screen TV clearly visible through the windows, displaying a hard-core videotape of a woman enthusiastically giving head. "That's what I'm talkin' 'bout!" one of the men shouts at a passing woman. Low-rider Chevy Impalas bounce crazily down the lane, powerful hydraulic jacks lifting the wheels off the pavement as if the car were having a seizure.

Motorcycles are everywhere. There are at least 300 bikes of all types: plastic-wrapped roadracers, chromed-out Harleys, and massive touring behemoths. But you can see those anywhere; what stands out are the street drag machines — long, lowered beasts designed to go straight and fast for a quarter mile. Some are ratted out, all rust and mismatched body panels. But most are immaculate, custom hot rods painted in reds, blues, and blacks so shiny they look wet; what isn't painted is chromed.

The street is an apocalyptic sight. Between the lanes of stalled cars, on the sidewalks, everywhere, riders are doing burnouts; the roar from unmuffled exhausts hammers the night air, a fog of vaporized rubber hangs under the streetlights, the booming noise of backfires is constant. Suddenly, there's a sharp, flat crack — unmistakably *not* a backfire. People dive to the ground or flee the corner where the sound came from. A few yank pistols from their waistbands and scan the area intently. But no one is screaming, there's no blood on the sidewalk, and within seconds, the iron is tucked away and the party goes on.

On the tailgate of a blue GMC pickup truck across from the party building, Pokey, Shepherd, and Stunt Man, members of the Pasadena-based Valiant Riders, are holding court, dusting Corona beers and Captain Morgan spiced rum and flirting with every woman that rolls past in a car. They got here early to grab a prime party spot, their immaculate motorcycles chained in the back. Pokey is smarter than some of these lunatics, and he's leaving his bike where it's safe tonight. He's going to need New Black, a seriously fast 158-horsepower black-and-gray Suzuki, for the upcoming games.

Tomorrow, Pokey will join other riders and spectators on an abandoned back road outside of Fresno to engage in an American tradition as old as the motorized vehicle — illegal street racing. Think of the drag racing scenes from *American Graffiti*, except that instead of Harrison Ford and hot rod Chevys and Ford coupes, there are black guys in leather vests and bad-tempered two-wheelers. Pokey's one of the quickest draws on the West Coast; his nickname a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of his talent.

And he isn't shy about talking trash like a WWF wrestler before a pay-per-view match when he hears of someone else boasting that they will be fastest tomorrow. "Tell that motherfucker he better be wired for sound, 'cause I'm gonna be ready to burn his ass. He ain't gonna have no eyebrows left," Pokey says to K-9, a friend and member of the Soul Brothers Motorcycle Club out of Fresno. Thousands of dollars change hands during these races, and bettors walk up to chat with Pokey, checking out his bike and feeling out his mood, as if they were scoping out a jockey at Hollywood Park. "You racing tomorrow? I got a couple hundreds with me and I want to make mo' mun-eee," says one. "Bet on New Black," says Pokey, who wears his long straight black hair rubber-banded in a ponytail, thick gold rings on each finger, and a thick gold chain around his neck.

Pokey has reason to be confident. A year ago, he came up here and kicked serious butt. He's known as one of the fastest street racers in California. Tens of thousands of dollars have been bet on him and his bikes over the years. He's been with the Valiant Riders for two decades and a player on the street-racing scene for seven years. But he's seriously considering making this his last run. Pokey's 42 now, tired of psyching himself up for the races, tired of constantly repairing and developing the bike, tired of sacrificing his tax refunds to the gods of horsepower. He's put another grand into New Black just for this weekend. He's just bought a new house, he's got to worry about paint and plumbing now.

"I'm not scared; I'm just getting too old, too tired," he says. "I'm here to kick ass one more time, then close the door behind me."

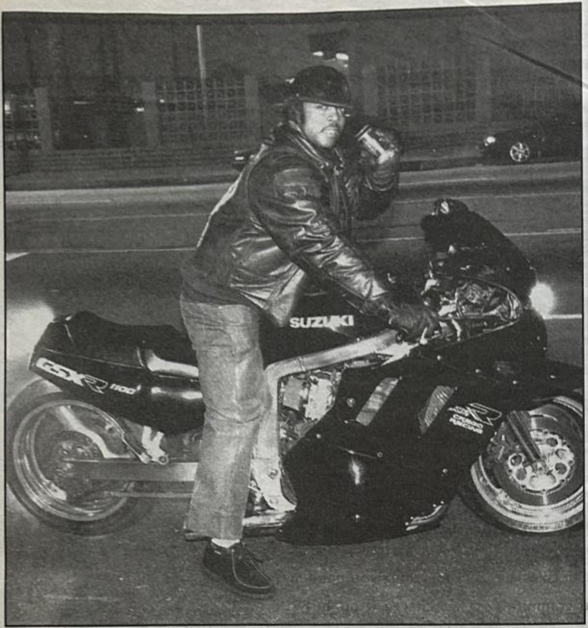
"You want to talk about street racing? Go talk to that guy. People have won a lot of money betting on that motherfucker," says Dennis Goode, West Coast representative for *Long Riders* magazine, which specializes in covering the biker clubs of color. Goode is standing outside a rented senior citizens' center on Central Avenue, just west of Watts, where the Rising Sons biker club is holding its annual dance, a considerably tamer affair than the Fresno gathering. People from different South L.A. clubs — their jackets emblazoned with the yellow crests of the Rising Sons, the white of the City Slickers, the black and yellow of the Deuces — mingle in the courtyard. Through an iron gate strides the guy Goode is referring to: Manuel Galloway, a.k.a Pokey, wearing a black leather jacket and shorty helmet, little more than a bowl that covers the top of his skull. Inside the senior center, you'd be hard-pressed to know it was a biker dance if you took away the vests and colors: There are people of all ages dancing to Motown and popular, lightweight hip-hop tunes spun by the DJ. But on the street, riders jam their bikes into any spot they can find near a curb; it's 11 p.m. on a Saturday, it's packed, and more and more people keep showing up.

This scene is repeated almost every weekend night in L.A. — if you know where to look. But that knowledge doesn't come easily. Suspicion of outsiders runs deep among these guys, and that's not surprising. Motorcyclists have been demonized in film and on television for years. A large percentage of African-Americans believe the CIA was involved in introducing crack to the inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles. And street racing is, after all, illegal. Combine all that, and it's not surprising that African-American racers would be doubly cautious about speaking to anyone they didn't personally know and trust. They give out their nicknames easily; legal names are harder to come by. Most are very circumspect in what they say about others. Frequently, one of the first questions an outsider faces is impossible to answer: How do you prove that you're *not* an undercover cop or FBI agent?

Most of the black motorcycle clubs trace their roots back 30 years or more, to a time when many African-Americans were finally cracking the racial barriers that kept them out of public-sector jobs. That meant disposable income. Give a guy some extra cash, and things like motorcycles tend to appear in his garage. But many found themselves locked out of existing bike clubs due to racism. The spirit of affirmative action hadn't yet reached the outlaw biker stratum of society; the Hells Angels didn't feel the need to diversify its membership.

And truth be told, many African-American bikers weren't that interested in hooking up with white outlaws anyway; they preferred hanging out with fellow bloods from the hood. There were — and are — some thugs and players on the black biker scene, but there are also a lot of blue-collar workers and professionals, nine-to-five guys who just wanted to ride and hang out on the weekends. Many black clubs bought clubhouses, organized themselves like the Rotary Club — a sponsor gets you in, the club votes on granting you full membership and colors — and have a social **Continued on page 16**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON LEWIS



Pokey drinks up outside a South Central biker party.

Biker Boyz

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schedule that revolves around dances, parties, and afternoon picnics up and down the state.

The black biker scene may fly under most people's radar, but it is alive and thriving. Nowadays, there are a couple of thousand members in about 25 active Southern California clubs. Around South Central L.A., there are warehouses filled with bikes, mechanics with serious speed secrets in their heads, hangouts you would never find unless you were invited. Or unless you were crazy enough to walk up to a beat-up stucco building with iron bars over the doors and windows, the word "Zodiacs" on a painted sign over the door, and knock.

The black clubs' racial demographic roughly reflects their neighborhoods. No one is excluded — there are a handful of non-blacks at many gatherings — but there aren't a lot of Finns living near 120th and Broadway. One other difference: These guys from South Central are into speed, into bikes that can *run*. Unlike the Hells Angels and other white biker gangs, they don't spend a lot of time manufacturing methamphetamines or trying to murder undercover narcs. Black bikers live to ride all over California and party, but the main attraction of their meets is the next day, the quarter-mile, when the gunslingers square off.

The machine of choice is the street drag bike, Japanese iron that's been stretched and lowered, its engine pumped full of steroids. Everything about it is designed for speed. The front tire is rock-hard and as skinny as a bicycle's for minimum rolling resistance. The rear is slick and up to a foot wide, in order to put maximum horsepower to the ground. The bikes accelerate so quickly that they might zip right out from between a rider's legs if it weren't for the molded seats that hold them aboard. When a really fast machine hits the redline, the rider thumbs a button and a canister of compressed air slams the shifter into the next gear. Some guys inject "squeeze" — nitrous oxide, just like the dentist uses — into their carburetors; it's an old hot-rod trick that results in a massive hit of horsepower. On back streets, in alleys late at night, they fire these bikes in a straight line, side by side, for a quarter mile, for money and bragging rights.

Pokey with his bike, New Black, at the Fresno drag races.

And one of the best racers in California — of any skin hue — is Pokey.

His club, the Valiant Riders, first came together in Monrovia, down along the foothills of the San Gabriel Valley, about 30 years ago. Shortly afterward, they moved west to Pasadena. Pokey is president of the six tight-knit members who hang out at the dances and roll together. "This is not a game. This is something that's real. Everyone lives their lives through this," he says at his modest home in predominantly black northwest Pasadena, which also serves as the Valiant Riders' clubhouse. On one wall are three tall mirrors; above each is the embroidered name patch of a dead biker friend. A few days later, Pokey would attend yet another funeral. A friend nicknamed Junkman — his bikes always looked like patched-together wrecks — succumbed to pneumonia. Pokey remembers Junkman fondly, recalling a run back from the desert when he found himself behind Junkman and getting splattered. "We got back here and told him, 'Man, you gotta fix that thing, it's leaking oil.' He said his bike wasn't leaking, it was him — he was peeing. And man, he was *huge*," says Pokey, holding his hands about a foot apart. "I mean, his pants were dry; he didn't get any on him when he fired off the side."

> **"A lot of the [black biker] clubs don't teach the old ways no more. I try to keep the old ways."**
> **– Pokey, a.k.a. Manuel Galloway**

Membership has dwindled considerably since the club's heyday in the 1980s, when the Valiant Riders had more than 25 people wearing its colors. Once a month, the club meets in Pokey's kitchen. He's been the leader of the pack for nearly 20 years, and doesn't take much in the way of bullshit from others. "I always say, 'You got something to say, you say it right here, to me,'" he says, recounting how he'd excommunicated some members for talking behind his back.

Pokey's not tall, less than five feet 10 inches, but from the rib cage up, he's nothing but muscle. Bench-pressing 375 pounds doesn't make him sweat. He's a bachelor with a full-time job as a maintenance inspector and contract coordinator for the city of Pasadena. For much of his adult life he's run with the Valiant Riders. His social life revolves around the scene. "The clubs are like a family," he says. "Being in a club, it's like you're always looking forward to something, having something to do."

When Pokey's not out at a dance clowning ("I'm not a braggart, but once you fire me up...") he is straightforward and sticks by his word. His biker buddy Clean, a.k.a. Gerald Randolph, 37, a New Orleans-born construction supervisor who got his nickname from his impeccable attire, is also a street drag racer and founder of another black club, the Real Bikers. "He's the same with everyone," Clean says of Pokey. "He's straight-up." In a culture where people are extremely wary of speaking about someone else to outsiders, it's a serious compliment. There is real affection in Pokey's voice when he talks about Stunt Man, Shepherd, and the other Valiant Riders: "Everybody loves each other now, not just says they do," he says.

It might seem odd, but Pokey's almost conservative in his reverence for tradition and codes of honor. When he joined the Valiant Riders in the early '80s, there was a formal induction process for new members. Older riders introduced the younger ones to members of other clubs. Seniority conferred status. You didn't just show up and join a club, but earned your way in by spending time as a prospect. Indeed, one recent afternoon, Pokey had a prospect in his garage, washing his black Mustang 5.0 in a time-honored ritual of obeisance. He's not shy about flirting with the women on the scene. But even in courtship, there's a code of honor that he respects. "When you walk up to a woman, you ask, 'You got a man? You here with somebody?' We used to have a guy who'd just use the club as an excuse so he could go out behind his girlfriend's back. He'd call me and say, 'I was with you tonight, okay?' I took his colors back myself.

"When you are out there with the colors on, you are representing the club and all the people in it," he says. To show respect and support, if a club's members couldn't make another club's dance, they offered something in compensation. "Like, I'm hosting this dance — a pre-Valentine's Day bash — on the same night this other club is holding their annual dance. What I'll do is go to them and say, 'Hey, we ain't gonna make it, but the boys would have spent about $50 at the bar,' and give them $50," Pokey says. "It's a matter of showing respect for each other, keeping the peace. A lot of the clubs

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don't teach the old ways no more. I try to keep the old ways."

Pokey's worst moment in the past couple of decades had nothing to do with himself. Three years ago, a close friend nicknamed Seaweed smacked into the side of a van and crashed through the windows on both sides. "Burying him was the hardest," he says, recalling how Seaweed was always willing to push a club member's broken bike back home by riding alongside, his own leg braced against the busted bike's rear shock absorber. Ironically, Pokey's worst crash came when he was just cruising down the street and a van turned left in front of him; the bike stopped, Pokey didn't, flying over the van and landing in the street. Bruises and scrapes; no serious injuries. Ask about the scars on his chest, and Pokey relates his brush with a cancerous tumor that showed up during a physical examination about five years ago. The growth, Pokey says, had spread down his throat and into his chest. Three months later, after doctors had been unable to fix it, he went in for another examination and it was gone. "I know what happened," he says. "God came and told me he would cure me. I could hear his voice like I'm talking to you. The only thing he wanted was for me to tell other people what He'd done — just like I'm telling you now."

Beer, bucks, and bikes: the crowd at the Fresno races

Show respect and Pokey can be the best of companions, someone who will get you out of a fight at a dance when you've said something you shouldn't have, someone who's carried club members home when they've been puking, someone who opened his house to a club member detoxing from crack. But he'll admit to having a bad attitude when it comes to police. "When you've been pulled over as much as I have, you kind of get a resentment. But I'm riding a bike, I'm going to a dance, they expect me to wear this?" he says, reaching into a closet and pulling out a three-piece suit. And talk smack behind his back and he will confront you — sometimes with a fist to the jaw. Not long ago, a former Valiant Riders member was at a dance "talking shit, and I couldn't take it anymore. He was about from here to there" — Pokey points at a door about 20 feet away — "and I ran over there and cracked him in the jaw. Know all those rings I wear when I go out? His face just split, man; he just went down. I help them out a little, kinda mold them a little, then they rebel."

Pokey remembers clearly the night he started racing seriously. He got sick of a guy nicknamed Slick Rick taunting him.

"It was in 1993, and a guy named Slick Rick was out there kicking everyone's ass," Pokey says. "He was always standing there, like a bully — 'What you wanna do? You want some?', like that. I started practicing. I couldn't stand that. So one Wednesday night, we're up at the Brothers of the Sun [biker clubhouse in Pasadena], and Slick Rick was racing someone. I was sitting on [my bike] Big Black, about 50 yards ahead of them. And when they came by, I don't know why, but I took off after them. They had a running start, but I caught the guy Rick was racing. Slick Rick was way up there, but I could tell — I was making ground on him." That Friday, Pokey was hanging out at another clubhouse when someone said to him, "Slick Rick says he kicked your ass.' I wasn't even racing him and he was talking shit."

The next Wednesday, Pokey cruised back over to the Brothers of the Sun clubhouse at about 11 p.m. Slick Rick and his Suzuki were outside. "He came up to me and said, 'You want some?' And I said, 'Yeah, I want some. Let's go.' He wasn't expecting that. He got this fucked-up look on his face. My brother says, 'Hey, Slick Rick, why you stop smiling?'" The clubhouse emptied as members lined the side of the street. Pokey and Slick Rick lined up at a stoplight. The first race was a false start. Then in the second race, Pokey blew past Slick Rick as they shifted into third gear at well over 100 miles an hour. "That's what put me on the map," says Pokey.

Since then, Pokey's run the occasional grudge match, but usually waits until the statewide gatherings, where gunslingers from all over California show up. A San Diego club called Black Sabbath usually held one of the year's first. Bikers staged drag races, two riders at a time, on Market Street until the cops caught on. "You used to be able to do 10 runs up Market without any problems; now I just turn onto Market and there come the lights," he says.

Actually, many of the bikers are hypercompetitive. Ask one of them about someone else's bike, and more often than not you will hear exactly this phrase: "That thing ain't shit." Clean's street racer — a German-model Kawasaki ZX-10 — has been in the shop in recent months, and he can't wait to it running again. "Some of my fast friends got their shit back out on the street," he says. "And I hear they're saying things about me." Pokey is competitive at everything. There's a box of trophies from weight lifting contests at biker picnics in a spare bedroom. His old drag bike, Big Black, sits in the garage with cracked engine cases. By the time Pokey got done pumping up the engine, it put out more horsepower than the Japanese engineers ever intended those cases to hold. Unlike a lot of motorcyclists, he sees rain as an opportunity. "I'll get out there and practice my starts," Pokey says, learning to finesse the throttle and clutch to put the most power possible to that fat rear tire without spinning it. Pokey isn't shy about singing his own praises, but wants to make sure he can walk the walk.

The Fresno meet is one of the biggest of the year. Twenty-seven-year-old Trey McGee, of South L.A., is another of the quick triggers, a guy who's pursuing a professional career as a drag racer. Nowadays, McGee is usually found on the sanctioned, closed-course drag strips, firing a big screaming-yellow Suzuki down the quarter-mile at speeds over 150 miles an hour. But he cut his teeth on the street races, and Fresno stands out. "There were people just all along the side of the road, and they were so close that when I'd take off I could feel the bike running over their feet," he remembers.

Pokey's reputation was cemented in Fresno in 1998. He ran eight races in 30 minutes — and won every one. "I'd make a pass, turn around and by the time I'd got back, my brother would be lining me up against someone, and I'd be going again," he said. "I took a break to cool the bike down, and right then the Highway Patrol showed up. Since I wasn't doing anything right then, they couldn't do anything to me." Clean was betting instead of racing, and he was cleaning up on the sidelines like Pokey was on the street. "I made like $2,700 betting on him that day. We were running though the crowd, betting anyone who'd bet us. He's fast, and his bike was *running*," Clean said.

A skinny woman sticks a fistful of currency into the air and screams, "I got $300 on that black-and-gray motherfucker over there!"

CHP cruisers shimmering in the heat can be seen from at least a couple of miles away on the narrow, ruler-straight road. That's part of the reason this stretch of blacktop splitting two vineyards about 10 miles outside Fresno has been chosen — it's almost impossible to sneak up on the hundreds of people gathered here for the races. It's obvious the bikers have been here before. Mondo horsepower and sticky rear tires have dug divots into the pavement.

It's Sunday, just after noon, and the bikes and cars are coming in packs of 10 and 15, lining the roadway for a half mile or more as they park. Entrepreneurs pull metal sheds on

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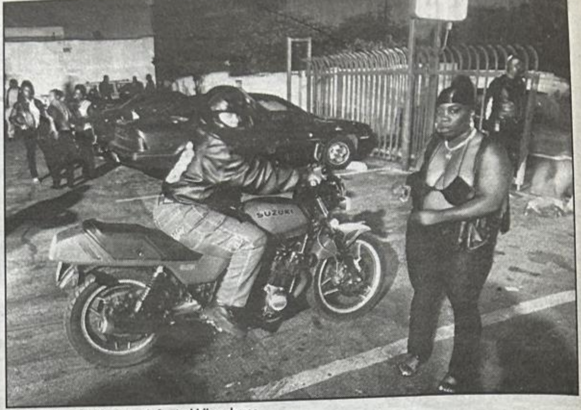

A biker babe outside a South Central biker dance

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trailers behind pickup trucks; they park and throw the door open, exposing half-barrel barbecue pits. The sweet tang of ribs competes with the more acrid smell of racing fuel. More than one person is wandering through the crowd selling beer from a cooler. The colors are many of the same as last night — the Chosen Few, the Zodiacs, Four Horsemen, Grim Reapers. The Magic Wheels are down from Seattle; God's Beloved are up from San Diego. In the middle of the street, next to a pickup truck, an impromptu game of dice erupts. Tens, twenties, and fifties hit the pavement and are scooped up a split second after the dice stop rolling. Some idiot pulls a couple of doughnuts in a clapped-out Firebird before someone tells him to knock it off; no sense attracting the cops before the racing starts.

Some racers ride their bikes in; other bikes show up in the backs of pickup trucks. One guy hauls a national-caliber roadracer off the back of a truck, inspection stickers from the last race still visible. Another guy pulls in late with a full-on track-only drag bike. Just taking the thing off the truck and starting it on the street is a violation of at least a dozen motor vehicle codes. No lights, no turn signals, no mufflers, no license places, no mirrors, no VIN number, no insurance…

Pokey, wearing stiff blue jeans, a white undershirt, and a black leather vest with the white-and-black Valiant Riders crest on the back, watches the crowd gather. New Black is spotless, its tank full of aviation-grade fuel. Pokey's still boasting, telling someone, "Just bet on New Black. If it ain't black, don't bet on it." Someone has the gall to express a doubt about New Black, and Pokey is pissed. "Get that shit off the truck," he yells to Shepherd and Stunt Man, pointing at New Black. "You asked for it. Get my bike!"

The racing itself is just short of chaos — there's no one really in charge. One rider walks up to another and issues a challenge; sometimes they bet a few bucks between themselves, sometimes not. They pick a starter they both trust. Then they cruise slowly up to the starting line as a crowd closes in, shouting out wagers like brokers in the pit on Wall Street. Calls of "I got 10 dollars on black!" and "I got 20 on red!" race through the crowd. A skinny, short woman sticks a fistful of currency into the air and screams, "I got *$300* on that black-and-gray motherfucker over there!"

Bets laid, the starter stands between the two bikes, hands in the air like an NFL referee signaling a touchdown. The crowd presses in. "These motherfuckers about to brawl like Mike Tyson with his license back," someone yells. Riders will complain that they're hitting people's legs and arms as they leave the line, the gamblers are so close. Then the starter drops both arms. The engines spin quickly to redline. Horsepower and traction combine to actually spit pieces of the crumbling hot asphalt out from under the rear tires and into the crowd, but it doesn't seem to faze anyone. As the riders rocket off into the distance, the crowd falls in behind them, cheering like Romans at a gladiator contest. "Look at that. He picked that motherfucker up like dog shit!" one guy yells. Then the starter raises one hand. Left hand up, the rider in the left lane has won; right hand up, right lane is the winner. There is no appeal process. The money changes hands, the next pair of riders approaches the starting line, and the cycle begins again. This goes on for nearly three hours until a Highway Patrol helicopter and cruiser arrive. The crowd disperses, rather calmly considering what they've been up to, but the racing is over for this weekend.

All afternoon, one bike's been missing: New Black. Pokey has learned the meaning of the phrase "tempting fate." He'd made a couple of practice runs, howling down the street hard, and pulled off the bodywork to make some adjustments to New Black. What he found was a pool of oil — a $10 fitting was broken, and there was no way to fix it. All the trash-talking, all the bravado, all the chest-thumping he'd done all weekend had turned around and bitten Pokey hard. All he had right now was a busted bike. The cocky smile was gone. Pokey was suddenly the guy who was fastest *last* year.

Pokey's face bore an expression of resignation that racers the world over would recognize. "I guess I just talked too much shit about somebody," he says, shoving New Black back into the truck, a spreading stain of oil marking where the bike had been parked. Few people stop by to talk to him anymore. Out here under the hot Central Valley sun, when people are laying hard cash on the line, only one thing matters — speed. Pokey's got none, and he's gone from hero to forgotten man in nothing flat. He's too disappointed to even guess if he'll take one more shot at the streets of Fresno. But knowing Pokey, it's a good bet that he'll be back.

Between runs by the bikers, his blue GMC pickup jumps back onto the pavement and heads back toward Highway 99 and home. NT